

INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER I

HABITAT

[p. 1]

Morphology

131 THE homeland of the Ovimbundu is the Benguela Highland in
133 central Angola. Strictly speaking the Highland comprises those
regions which have an elevation of 1,500 metres (about 4,920 feet)
or more. A glance at the accompanying map will show how closely
the territory inhabited by the Ovimbundu corresponds with the
extent of the Highland proper. The adjoining regions, in which
the Ovimbundu also live, nowhere have an elevation inferior to
1,000 metres (about 3,280 feet). Geographically the region of the
Highland is a part of the South African sub-continental plateau.
The ridges of the Highland form the plateau's highest north-
western portion.

133 Geologically this sub-continental plateau is one of the oldest
parts of the earth's surface. The north-western portion, with
which this study is concerned, has remained above sea-level from
before the time of fossils. The vast slab of primeval crystalline rock
which forms the foundation of the plateau often outcrops in the
form of isolated rocks of unusual appearance,¹ or in massive peaks,
the highest of which, in the western escarpment, reach an elevation
of nearly 9,000 feet (2,850 metres).² Some of these outcrops remain
bare, some are hidden by laterite and some by soil formed from
decomposition of rock.

Among the sediments which overlie these primeval rocks there
are unfossiliferous sandstones, conglomerates, and others, all of
[316] which are considered to be of Palaeozoic age. Deposits of iron are
numerous, many of which were once worked by the Ovimbundu
or by their predecessors. Much of the soil has been greatly im-
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¹ Several of these rocks have caught the attention of travellers and writers.
Luvili (north-west of Bailundu) is perhaps the most striking of all. Cameron
said that the natives called it "The Devil's Finger", a name I have not been able
to verify. *Nganda* and *Kawe* are near the railway between Nova Lisboa and
Vila Robert Williams. A journalist recently gave them the name of 'Cleopatra's
Breasts'.

² One of the peaks of the ridge called *Moko* (The Knife) is the highest, but
no complete survey has been made.

2 UMBUNDU KINSHIP AND CHARACTER

² Much of the soil has been greatly impoverished both by use and by the action of the weather. The most productive soil areas consist of alluvial deposits, but the precipitate nature of much of the region precludes the formation of such deposits. The bulk of the soil is rather poor, but still it is of better quality, on the whole, than in adjoining regions to the north, east, and south.¹

•/133 In common with several of the African plateaux the Benguela Highland rises very precipitately from the sea. This is one of the most striking features of African geography. The steepness of the ascent forces the Benguela Railway to use a cog-line for a short distance. The village of Ngendo, described in the section dealing with the social structure, has an elevation of about 1,650 metres (5,400 feet) but is situated at only about 60 miles from the ocean.² That part of the intermediate zone which adjoins the Highland on the west consists of river valleys between mountain ridges and is well watered, but between that and the sea the country is very arid. This arid region is in reality a northern extension of the Kalahari, Omaheke, and Namieb deserts. Much of this arid stretch is exceedingly rough mountainous country. All along the African coast there is a coastal plain, but in the region under consideration it is very narrow. Plain and mountain are equally arid and this desert country generally has an elevation of less than 1,000 metres (about 3,280 feet). This intermediate zone is well known to the Ovimbundu and played an important role in the history of their commercial developments since they were obliged to cross it to reach the European stations on the coast.

101 Other adjoining regions have also been of importance to the Ovimbundu. It was from the region to the north between the Highland and the Kuanza River that some of the principal ruling families came. Across this same region the Ovimbundu had their first European contacts—with the Portuguese establishments on the Kuanza River. In the regions to the south live cattle-raising people whence the Ovimbundu got cattle, whether by raiding or by trading. East of the Kuanza River valley the elevation drops gradually toward the basins of the Congo and the Zambezi. When the slave- and rubber-trades led the Ovimbundu into this region

¹ i.e. of all adjoining regions only on the north-west are there valleys of superior soil. No complete survey of the soils of Angola has been made. Most books overrate the qualities of the soils of the colony.

² See *infra*, Chap. II.

HABITAT

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they came to call it *ofeka yonjala*, 'The Hungry Country' or better 133
 'The Country of Hunger', since it was without inhabitants and 167
 consequently without the possibility of purchasing provisions.¹
 Much of the soil in all three of these adjoining regions is very [134]
 sandy and comparatively unproductive.

Many rivers find in the Benguela Highland a great catchment 133
 basin. The two largest are the Kuanza (Kuanja) and the Cunene
 (Kunene), both flowing into the Atlantic. Between them are the
 Queve (Keve, also marked 'Cuvo'), the Balombo, and the Catum-
 bela (Katombela), which also reach the ocean. A peculiar stream
 is the Cubango (Kuvango or Okavango), which rises near the
 source of the Cunene, and after becoming a great and free-flowing
 river loses itself in the Kalahari desert. Some authorities hold
 that through the Chobe swamp it maintains a seasonal connexion
 with the Zambezi. In this event the springs of the Benguela
 Highland feed the waters of both oceans. The part played by the
 Mbuluvulu plain in Bié (Viye) has often been noted by travellers
 and writers, for it drains into the Kuanza and also into the Cubango.
 As with most of the Southern Bantu,² rivers have had little direct-
 ly to do with building the material culture of the Ovimbundu.
 Watersheds have furnished trade-routes, and fishing has become [226]
 a side-line occupation for those who live conveniently near the
 streams. The rivers themselves, however, have always been of the
 greatest importance to the mass of the people who are dependent
 upon them for water, whether it comes in the form of rainfall or
 is taken more directly from the streams.

Climate

The regions under consideration in this study belong to the 132
 South Central African zone of summer rains. Coming on the
 monsoon from the Indian Ocean, the rains are precipitated by cold
 winds from the south-western antarctic current.³ The Benguela
 Highland constitutes a distinct climatic zone, as the fact of the
 altitude would lead one to infer. The adjoining and coastal regions

¹ Cf. H. W. Nevins, *A Modern Slavery*, chap. vi (New York: Harpers, 1906); also M. Burr, *A Fossicker in Angola* (London: Adelphi, 1933).

² A. J. H. Goodwin, 'Habitat', p. 34, in Schäperclaus, *The Bantu-Speaking Tribes of South Africa* (London: Routledge, 1937).

³ See C. E. P. Brooks and S. T. A. Mirrlees, *A Study of the Atmospheric Circulation over Tropical Africa*. Meteorological Office. Geophysical memoirs no. 55 (London: H.M.S.O., 1932).

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Photo. R. S. Webb

a. Rock outcrop beside the Keve River



Photo. M. W. Smith

b. Rapids of the Kuvale River (Katoembela system)

[facing p. 16]

161 But this number is probably made up by Ovimbundu emigrants to other colonies and to the Union of South Africa. (1)

162 There are no recent estimates of the populations of the various groups of Ovimbundu. Magyar in 1859 however gave figures which are of some interest. (2) He estimated the total Ovimbundu ("Kimbanda") population at 1,880,000, but points out that this number includes 300,000 from tribes which, though culturally resembling the Ovimbundu, are not linguistically related to them (Kissama, Mupinda, Mussumbe, Luesseke, Mnyemba and Massongo). Another 300,000 are from tribes which Magyar includes as "Kimbanda" speaking, but which are not generally reckoned as Ovimbundu today. (Nganda, Esele, Humbi, Lupolo, Hako and Kakingi.) This would leave 1,280,000, a figure remarkably near to the present estimate. The following are his figures for the separate groups:-

	Area in sq.m.	Population
Viye (Bie)	800	120,000
Bailundu	2,000	450,000
Wambu (Hambo)	?	120,000
Ciyaka (Kisakko)	?	75,000
Ngulangi (Calangus)	1,000	250,000
Civula (Kibala)	200	35,000
Ndulu (Andulo)	160	40,000
Semba (Sambos)	120	30,000
Kakonda (Caconda)	300	100,000
Total		1,270,000

There are no recent estimates of tribal density. The 1940 Census (3) gives density in the Provinces as :-

Bie Province (4)	1.5 per sq. km.
Benguela	8.5 per sq. km.
Nuils	2.0 per sq. km.

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT (5)

TOPOGRAPHY

133 The homeland of the Ovimbundu corresponds closely with the highest part of the Benguela Highland, i.e. the area lying between 11° and 15° South Latitude, and meridians 14° and 18° E. Altitude in this region is everywhere over 4,000 feet, and the western ridges rise as high as 9,000 feet, forming the highest north-western portion of the ancient South African sub-continental plateau. To the east, elevation drops gradually from the Kwanza valley towards the Kasai and Zambesi rivers. To the west, descent is irregular - in places almost precipitous - to the coastal plain. This plain and the stretch of higher country (below 3,200 feet) which separates it from the Highland proper, form an arid and sparsely-populated region which is a northerly extension of the Kalahari, Namib and Onaheke deserts.

(1) Childs, op.cit., p.9.

(2) Magyar, 1859, pp.125, 239, 361 etc.

(3) Quoted by Sarmiento, 1948.

(4) This figure is of little significance since Bie Province includes large sparsely-inhabited non-Ovimbundu areas in south-east Angola.

(5) Childs 1949, chap.I. Fitzgerald 1948, pp.278f. Hamby 1934, pp.108f.

The two largest rivers flowing from the Highland are the Kwanza and the Kunene, both of which flow into the Atlantic Ocean. Between them are the Keve, the Balombo and the Katumbela. The Kubango rises near the source of the Kunene and flows southwards towards the Kalahari Desert.

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SOILS AND VEGETATION

The foundation of the plateau is a vast slab of primeval crystalline rock, which frequently outcrops in the form of isolated rocks or of massive peaks. Some of these outcrops remain bare, while others are hidden by laterite and soil formed by rock decomposition. Sediments overlying the rocks include unfossiliferous sandstones and conglomerates, considered to be of Palaeozoic age. Much of the soil is poor, in many areas impoverished by use and by erosion; there are however a few alluvial deposits, and on the whole the soil is of better quality than in the adjoining regions to the east, north and south.

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Differences in vegetation between the Highland and the lower zone towards the coast are striking. Characteristic feature of the coastal area is the baobab (*Adansonia digitata*) and in the better-watered areas tropical forests occur. The Highland proper was until recently well-covered with a variety of trees; today, however, except in isolated areas in Bailundu and other regions, grasslands have taken the place of forest and woodland. Native methods of agriculture and annual fires have caused much deforestation, and this has been accentuated by the demands of European settlement and of the Railway, which up to the present time uses principally wood for fuel.

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CLIMATE

The Highland is well within the Tropical Zone, but altitude and the effect of the south-western Antarctic current combine to produce a moderate climate. The annual variation of temperature is relatively slight; a day's maximum is seldom above 90°F, and may be as low as 60°, but the usual maximum is around 80°. The minimum of 32° or even 30° is sometimes reached in the winter (about May 20th - July 20th), but more usually the minimum is 40° to 50° in the winter, and 50° to 55° for the rest of the year. There is considerably daily variation, especially in the winter, when differences of 42° are often registered.

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Mean annual rainfall varies from 40 to 60 inches, according to region. In the Highland the rains begin with a few showers during September, increase during October and November, have a break of two to four weeks in December, January or February, and continue until the end of April. The heaviest falls are usually in November and December, occasionally in March.

TRADITIONS OF ORIGIN AND HISTORY(1)

The Ovimbundu people represent a fusion of diverse stocks, chiefly of the Southern Bantu and of the Congo or Central Bantu peoples. The ruling

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(1) This section is a summary of the detailed account given by Childs 1949, pp. 164-231.

GEOGRAPHICAL FACTORS

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growth is under examination. This central plateau, the Benguela Highlands, rises in places to a height of 6,000 feet, an altitude which reduces the heat of the tropics and so modifies the flora, discouraging some types of vegetation and encouraging others. Hostility of the highlands to palm trees and the banana is appropriately discussed when dealing with cultural losses; while the fostering effect of reduced temperature and the presence of wide expanses of open country on the growth of maize and the keeping of cattle is a cultural gain.

The prevailing rains of Angola are from the northeast to the southwest; consequently the high plateau intercepts rain clouds which give an annual fall of sixty inches. This adequate rainfall is another factor which has affected economic life, density of population, communal welfare, and powers of expansion.

The villages of the Ovimbundu are built on hillsides having a commanding view of the surrounding country. There is in the nature of the land a natural protection from enemies. In addition to this the Benguela Highlands are an admirable base from which expeditions both predatory and commercial might, and actually did set out eastward to the interior of Africa, and southwest to the cattle-keeping country.

It is important to note that this central plateau is the watershed for four large river systems; the Kwanza to the northwest; the Cunene to the southwest; the tributaries of the Kasai to the northeast; and the Zambezi and its affluents to the southeast. Fishing, with attendant beliefs of a ritualistic kind, is of local importance; so also is the making of canoes. Moreover, the river valleys have marked out a natural means of communication in several directions.

In connection with the river system the biological factor of the tsetse fly is important, because the presence of the fly locally discourages human habitation and prevents the keeping of cattle. The exact distribution of the fly is imperfectly known, but *Glossinia palpalis*, the cause of sleeping sickness in human beings, also *Glossinia morsitans*, which carries disease to cattle, are both present along the Kwanza and parts of the other rivers (J. C. B. Statham, Through Angola, p. 294).

The western coastal strip is a region of great aridity which has in some years no rainfall whatever, because the northeasterly rains have expended themselves on the high plateau. This region displays vegetation of the semi-desert type; namely, baobab trees, prickly acacias, euphorbias, and aloes. Population in this area is sparse, always nomadic, and in some places non-existent. The coastal strip

The coastal strip

- 131 was at times traversed by the Ovimbundu who know of the sea and
 484 call it *kalunga*. Bihéan caravans crossed to the coast with slaves, as history shows, but the nature of the coastal strip marks it as a western barrier limiting the expansion of the Ovimbundu in that direction. The coast line itself is of the greatest moment in the consideration of historical factors. From Loanda, Benguela, and [177] Mossamedes on the coast, the Portuguese penetrated the interior, so making contacts with the Ovimbundu to the encouragement of caravan trade. The importance of this European contact will be seen in subsequent chapters.

The south and southwest parts of Angola are of particular importance in studying the contacts of the Ovimbundu, but to give here the details of the wealthy cattle-keeping culture of these regions, which were accessible through peaceful proximity, trade, and occasional raiding, would be an anticipation of chapter X, "Culture Contacts." [723] One topographical point is of primary importance; namely, the ease with which the Ovimbundu could descend from their strongholds to the low-lying land of the west and south, whereas the reverse journey is much more difficult for a people unaccustomed to manoeuvring and finding their way among hills.

- 101 Having described the northern, central, western, and southern areas, there remains only the eastern section to consider; this presents several features of peculiar geographical and ethnological interest. • [133] The eastern section of Angola is either slightly undulating or flat, the general characteristic is dryness, and vegetation is somewhat [136] sparse though sufficient to shelter many kinds of antelope.

The major population is the Vachokue, a warlike, hunting people, who follow agricultural pursuits but slightly, and do not keep cattle. Examination of the literature describing early exploration indicates [726] the truculent nature of these eastern people with whom caravans of Ovimbundu were in frequent conflict. Umbundu caravans crossed this country when making their way to Rhodesia, culture contacts with which are discussed in chapter X.

The results of contact of Ovimbundu and Vachokue tribes, so far as physical miscegenation is concerned, are mentioned in chapter "Physical Appearance"; while the social effects of slavery resulting from hostilities are described in chapter VI, "Social Life."

- 174 Rhodesia is a cattle-raising country, but the hostility of the
 231 Vachokue, the great distance from central Angola to Rhodesia, and the general dryness of the country to be crossed, discourage the idea that the Ovimbundu obtained their cattle from Rhodesia. If it is

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argued that the cattle might have been brought along the course of the Zambezi and Kwando there is the objection that there are here several tsetse fly belts. On the contrary, cattle-producing country in the southwest and south of Angola is far more accessible than the Rhodesian plateau. 174 231

In the south there is the cultural habit of digging wells, especially among the Vakuanyama; but the Vachokue have not developed this trait. The substrata underlying the sand of southern Angola hold water which serves through the dry season, a fact which is advantageously employed by the cattle-keepers. The Vachokue lack this well-digging habit, and, even if subsurface water were present, the transient Ovimbundu would have lacked opportunity to dig for it when passing through hostile country. 312 171

The acquisition of cattle by the Ovimbundu is of great importance, because it is concerned with the grafting of a series of pastoral traits on a culture in no way originally associated with pastoral pursuits. The truth of this will later be made clear by examination of historical and ethnological evidence. 233

Geographical considerations give a picture of the Ovimbundu situated in naturally fortified country from which they had access to four surrounding areas, whose cultural characters agree well with the determinism of topography and climate. The natural advantages of the central highlands, and the results of contact with each of the adjacent areas, are points which will be developed in appropriate sections throughout the ensuing chapters. 133

167 Many of the people in Gumba had come from
 177 THE OVIMBUNDU UNDER TWO SOVEREIGNTIES

- 133 Cela, and Cela influences are notable in several ways.²⁴ In Cassongue Umbundu has relatively recently ousted other speech.²⁵ Geographically Bimbe generally is rather lower than most of the Highland. Although the railway line and the growth of maize have been influential here, an alternative pull for labour migration is provided by the coffee plantation of Amboim and Seles, and by the coastal towns of Novo Redondo and Porto Amboim.²⁶ In the days of the caravan trade Novo Redondo was an important trading centre, more important perhaps than Benguela for the people of this area.

464 Work is sought by Ovimbundu in lands far from their home.
 176 There are Ovimbundu at Brazzaville; others have settled permanently in the Congo Republic, or work in Rhodesia; the Johannesburg mines have employed many, and some have gone as far as Natal.²⁷ In Epalanga, the village where I lived, there were two men who had been to Johannesburg—nor was this very exceptional and I am told that among the people south of the railway it is quite common.

82 The world picture of the Ovimbundu is vague, except as regards Angola and the neighbouring countries. The existence of Europe (Putu) composed of different nations Portuguese, French, and English is known, and I was several times asked if there were black people in England. Little or nothing is known of the other continents. The island of S. Tomé in the Atlantic is known, since up to recently Angolan labourers went there, and some convicts are still sent to it. Several people from the neighbourhood had lived in Luanda or worked on coffee plantations in northern Angola. The Belgian Congo was known as Bula Matadi, though people seem little aware of Rhodesia, and Mozambique (Portuguese East Africa) is confused with the southern Angolan port of Moçamedes. The railway lines and the cities along it are of course well known, and some of the people I knew had travelled to Kwanyama country in the far south of Angola to buy cattle. Johannesburg (Zhwaini) and its

²⁴ Notably in the arm ornaments and hair styles favoured by some women. Cela diviners are often consulted.

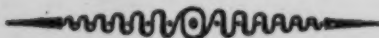
²⁵ Childs (p. 179) suggests that the change came about in the nineteenth century.

²⁶ For this area of Angola see Egerton, pp. 186-8. Galvão and Selvagem, pp. 378-80, 457-8.

²⁷ Personal information. Also Childs, p. 213.

CHAPTER V

VILLAGE ECONOMICS



The homeland of the Ovimbundu, the Benguela Highland, is mostly over 4,000 feet above sea-level. Rainfall is 50-60 inches a year, and the rainy season is from September to April.¹ In this season after a downpour there is frequently a cooling of the air, and the most intense heat comes just before the rainy season, during the dry spell that occurs in or about February, and just after the rains. Between the middle of May and the middle of July the nights and early mornings are bitterly cold but the days are pleasantly cool. After the middle of July the temperature gradually rises. 132
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The soil of the Highland is poor; the Ovimbundu industriously cultivate beans, manioc, maize, potatoes, and tobacco. Less frequently they have coffee plants, fruit trees, and sisal. Occasionally wheat is grown but the ground is not really suitable. I am told that rice could be grown in the stream valleys. Four field types are recognized by the Ovimbundu—*otjumbo* (garden), *onaka* (stream-valley garden), *ombanda* (in ground sloping up from a stream), and *epya* (a field away from the streams on level ground).² 241
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Umbundu country is well supplied with water in streams and rivers, and the Ovimbundu have built irrigation channels wherever possible. Cultivation in the stream valleys, that is, of the *onaka* type of garden, has only been practised since the 1870's or 80's.³ They are planted in August or the beginning of September, and give crops in December and January. The

¹ For an excellent account of Umbundu habitat see Childs, pp. 1-11.

² Albino Alves, *Dicionário Etimológico Bundo-Português*, Lisbon, 1931, Vol. I, p. 659 gives *ombanda* as a synonym of *onaka*.

³ Private information.